

LET'S GET REAL DEEPER LEARNING AND THE POWER OF THE WORKPLACE

By Nancy Hoffman

Students
at the
Center



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

While the phrase “college and career readiness” pervades current policy debates about high school improvement, “career readiness” often seems like an afterthought, tacked on as if to suggest that an academic, college-prep course of study—the real priority of most recent school reforms—will automatically produce better job prospects.

In the United States, we tend to assume that young people should become educated and *then* go to work, as though the two were entirely separate stages of life. But this dichotomy blinds us to the fact that work itself can be a powerful means of education—giving students opportunities to apply academic subject matter to real-world problems, and pushing adolescents to grow up and gain other deeper learning skills such as following difficult assignments through to completion, working in teams, solving unscripted problems, and communicating effectively with colleagues of differing ages and backgrounds.

However, currently there are great challenges to youth participating in the world of work. In 2000, 44 percent of U.S. teens were in the labor market; by 2011, the figure had dropped to 24 percent. And for urban, low-income teens of color, the odds of having a job—any job at all—now stand at roughly 10 percent. These first jobs tend to be much lower

paying than in the past, and the majority are not in sectors that tend to lead into family-supporting careers.

In the paper *Let's Get Real: Deeper Learning and the Power of the Workplace*, author Nancy Hoffman argues that the current discussion about deeper learning in the nation's high schools ought to acknowledge that career readiness isn't just an outcome of the K-12 curriculum but a *process*—often overlapping with academic studies—through which young people learn deeply and prepare for working life.

Hoffman makes the case that current federal, state, and local policies could be updated to incentivize and enable work-based learning opportunities and alignment between expectations for success in education and success in the workplace. Greatly diminished youth employment opportunities in today's labor market make work-based learning opportunities connected to educational pathways more critical than ever.

Hoffman contends that there are models of high-quality work-related education in many states, some promoted through national initiatives and networks, others impressive “one off” schools and programs, as well as vocational or career and technical education, or CTE, schools and centers.

For example, up-to-date vocational high schools and centers, career academies, High Tech High Schools, Project Lead the Way, Big Picture Schools, Cristo Rey schools, and many early college schools all provide some form of applied learning related to the labor market from programs linked to industries (e.g., finance, veterinary technology, information technology, and health care), and individualized mentorship.

The problem is that such excellent programs and schools currently serve only a relatively small number of students. And the question is: can these excellent models be further scaled up and their approaches refined and adapted in our many comprehensive high schools? Can the U.S. develop a system that promotes career education?

Hoffman argues that there are several policy opportunities that could make this goal a reality. **To scale up existing opportunities for work-based deeper learning, federal and state policies should incentivize:**

- Employers to take young people into workplaces for meaningful learning experiences
- Educators to implement work-based experiences as a means of learning deeply
- Intermediary organizations (such as Workforce Investment Boards, chambers of commerce, and other workforce nonprofits) to translate between educators and employers and provide the infrastructure that makes collaboration possible

These approaches will require careful attention to principles of educational quality, with an emphasis on deeper learning.

State Policy Activity

Many states are already working on enabling initiatives and policies that might provide deeper learning by better linking academic learning to work-based learning and regional labor market information. This is particularly true of states participating in Jobs for the Future's Pathways to Prosperity Network (Arizona, California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, and Wisconsin).

These enabling state policies help to:

- **Organize cross-agency state leadership teams** to guide and implement the vision for the Pathways work, **jumpstart regional initiatives by providing initial investments** in 9-14 career pathways, and **build out these career pathways** through policies that connect and align high schools with community and technical colleges and industry certification programs in growing sectors of the economy.
 - » State-level teams include representatives from state agencies responsible for economic development, commerce, workforce and labor, and K-12 and higher education, along with nonprofit and industry sector leaders.

In FY 2014, the **California** Assembly and Senate appropriated \$250 million in competitive grant funds to regions and consortia seeking to create and expand career pathways that build stronger connections between businesses, California schools, and community colleges, with an additional \$250 million to be released in FY 2015. The competitive criteria sought to ensure that opportunities for rigorous academics integrated with work-based learning activities become more widely available and aligned to the regional economy.

- **Establish more robust career information and advising systems** linking online resources and appropriate counseling from teachers, mentors, and others; and **utilize student learning plans to stretch students' aspirations.**

In 2013, in partnership with IBM, **New York** Governor Andrew M. Cuomo announced a statewide competition to form public-private partnerships in a range of industries and communities—nicknamed NYS P-TECH after the first P-TECH high school in NYC. The first cohort of 16 schools will allow more than 6,000 high school students to earn an Associate's degree while in high school at no cost to their families, while preparing them for high-skilled jobs in technology, manufacturing, and health care. Students will be first in line for jobs with participating companies when they graduate. In addition to the 16 schools, 10 new partnerships are planned for 2014-15.

- **Incentivize employer engagement and a continuum of work-based learning opportunities**, including job shadowing, paid or unpaid internships, virtual and group experiences, paid part-time and/or summer employment, and youth apprenticeships or pre-apprenticeships. Incentives may include, among other measures, subsidies, tax credits, training levies, and vendor contract requirements.

- **Embed work-based learning in the curriculum**, including through: expanded learning time, credit for work-based learning, inclusion of work-based learning in well-designed systems of career development education, teacher externship opportunities, and the provision of endorsements, honors, or “seals” for technical education courses that incorporate work-based learning.
- **Provide state support to build or strengthen intermediary organizations needed to carry out pathways development**, and encourage a broadened role that focuses on in-school youth.
 - » Intermediaries generally guide and sustain the vision for pathways work in a region, they convene key stakeholders, and they support the development and implementation of career education and work-based learning opportunities.
 - » State-level support for intermediaries can take several possible avenues, including directing additional resources to Workforce Investment Boards that are carrying out intermediary functions or making use of federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Perkins funds to support intermediaries focused on work-based learning.

In **Tennessee**, the state is utilizing authority within the federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act to create a reserve fund of up to 10 percent of the state’s Perkins funds for new and innovative programs. Tennessee is using the 10 percent reserve fund to support secondary to postsecondary transition, and to fund regional intermediaries supporting work-based learning and career pathways opportunities in schools.

In **Massachusetts**, a unique line item in the budget funds *Connecting Activities*, which provides funding to local Workforce Investment Boards to partner with school districts to offer work-based learning opportunities and other career awareness activities through schools. WIBs are enabled to support staff members that work with schools and businesses to develop a range of career-related activities.

The federal government can also further encourage the expansion and scale of a continuum of work-based learning opportunities for students that can contribute to deeper learning, in major reauthorization bills such as:

- The **Elementary and Secondary Education Act**—e.g., alignment with other college- and career-related bills, incentives for innovation around work-based learning opportunities in rigorous pathways, and metrics capturing deeper learning—with work-based learning as a component of career readiness
- The **Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act**—e.g., incentives for career pathways and work-based learning opportunities, as well as more strategic uses of the state innovation reserve
- The **Higher Education Act**—e.g., more targeted uses of Work Study funds for internships aligned to a student’s major
- The **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act**—e.g., technical assistance and guidance for implementing career pathways for in-school and out-of-school youth
- Or through other federal incentives such as the tax code or innovation funds (such as Youth CareerConnect, Investing in Innovation, or newer concepts)

Work can provide an engaging environment in which students further develop the interpersonal, communication, persistence, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills that are a part of deeper learning and that can contribute to their success in education, careers, and life in a community. While state and federal policies are not an end in themselves, they can help create an enabling context for work-based learning experiences and other authentic career-related learning for students. The examples described in this brief can help serve as a guiding light as state and federal policymakers expand their conception of deeper learning and seek to make career-related learning linked to regional labor markets an integral part of school for more students.

This policy bulletin is based on a report published by Students at the Center, an initiative of Jobs for the Future. The report was funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

This work, *Let's Get Real: Deeper Learning and the Power of the Workplace*, is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 United States License](#). Photos, logos, and publications displayed on this site are excepted from this license, except where noted.

The full report and an executive summary are available at www.jff.org/publications/lets-get-real

Cover photography © iStockphoto/loonger 2014